

Ulster County Legislature adopts 2019 budget, sends it to Hein

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KINGSTON, N.Y. — The Ulster County Legislature on Wednesday adopted a county spending plan for the coming year that decreases the property tax levy and provides funding for a number of programs near and dear to lawmakers.

The unanimous approval of the 2019 budget came after legislators put their mark on the \$329 million plan proposed by County Executive Michael Hein through a series of resolution that altered the plan to reflect the will of the Legislature.

Although the amount of the final budget wasn't available Wednesday, [Hein had proposed a \\$329 million budget that carried a spending increase of \\$5.1 million](#), or 1.6 percent, over the \$323.8 million county budget adopted for 2018. The property tax levy is to drop by 0.2 percent. Legislators said the changes won't alter the property tax levy.

Among the changes made by the Legislature to the executive budget was one that would put back into the hands of lawmakers decisions about how arts programs in the county will be funded. Historically funded by lawmakers through legislative amendments, Hein this year doubled funding for the arts and put it under the jurisdiction of the county Planning Department, giving him control over how the funding was spent.

Legislators also approved pay raises for two longtime assistant district attorneys and some legislative staff members, and added a second fiscal analyst to the Legislature's offices.

Legislators rejected, however, a resolution that would have given nine management employees raises in excess of the 2 percent that all management and nonunion employees are getting until a salary study is completed.

Lawmakers voted to provide funding to a number of not-for-profit agencies that provide programs for the county, including \$12,500 to AWARENESS, a drug and alcohol peer counseling program, and \$5,000 for an anti-bullying program. They also added \$46,000 to hire an external contractor to help coordinate the county's Green Business program and \$100,000 for the county's Restorative Justice Center.

Legislators did not incorporate in their final budget [any amendments not passed out of the Legislature's Ways and Means Committee](#) or potential budget changes detailed by The Benjamin Center for Public Policy at SUNY New Paltz, the Legislature's budget consultant.

The center, headed by former Legislature Chairman Gerald Benjamin, said the county could increase estimated sales tax and hotel/motel tax revenues and reduce by \$1 million the amount to be generated by property taxes.

In almost every instance, legislators tapped the county contingency fund built into the budget to buffer against unanticipated expenses.

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On Tuesday, Hein expressed concern over use of the contingency fund to pay for legislative initiatives.

“I look forward to working with the Legislature, but I will not support draining a contingency account that is specifically there to protect the citizens of Ulster County in case of emergencies that invariably occur,” Hein said.

Legislature Chairman Ken Ronk said he was pleased with the final budget, though there were some things included that he doesn't necessarily agree with.

“All in all, we're cutting taxes again, we're investing in infrastructure, we're really making a better government for the people of Ulster County every single year, and I really hope the county executive signs the budget that was just put together,” said Ronk, R-Walkkill.

Ronk said the budget will be delivered to Hein's office on Thursday. Hein will have five days to allow the budget to stand as adopted or veto any changes made to it.

The Legislature is scheduled to meet Dec. 18 to consider overrides to any vetoes.